

# Hybrid War Can Wreak Havoc Across West Africa

## Part V

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*In approaching the end of the African Hybrid War research, the series will now take to addressing the strategic vulnerabilities inherent in Niger, a country which is triply important for its uranium reserves, geographic position just north of Niger, and the emerging French-Chinese competition there.*

These three factors combine in such a way as to make this landlocked and atrociously impoverished country a lot more important than the unaware reader might immediately assume, thus broadly explaining the reason why it's included in this continental study. The research will accordingly begin by highlighting some of the most relevant characteristics about Niger in order to comprehensively introduce the country to the reader. Afterwards, it'll examine the French and Chinese sectors of interest before delving into the various asymmetrical threats that imperil Nigerien stability. Once that's done, the last part of the research will speak on the significance of coups in the country's short history and forecast why it's more than likely that this will remain a recurring event in the coming decades.

Niger: Middle Of Nowhere Or Undiscovered Significance?

### Geographic:

Most people that even have a passing familiarity with Niger might reactively dismiss it as nothing more than a desert-strewn wasteland of zero strategic value, but such superficial and uneducated individuals would be doing themselves and all others an enormous disservice by not taking the time to learn about the country and appreciate its strategic significance. It's true that the Sahara occupies the vast majority of the country's territory, and that most of Niger is sparsely inhabited if it's even populated at all. Moreover, there's also veracity to the statement that it's a huge country because its [total area](#) nearly equals that of France, Germany, and Poland combined (the Weimar Triangle).

### Demographic:

If astute researches dig a bit deeper, though, they'll find out that the country of 17 million people is the [fastest-growing](#) one in the world when it comes to population, with the UN's [2015 World Population Prospects](#) report predicting that it will reach 72 million by mid-century and then top 209 million by 2100. Just about all of this growth is expected to take place along Niger's densely populated southern border and among people who are already dependent on [agriculture](#) and [foreign aid](#) to survive. This is one of the main reasons why Niger is [one of the poorest countries](#) in the world today, and it's unfortunately forecast to

remain so for the coming future unless something fundamentally changes to address that.

### Energy:

Even though Niger has hefty [uranium](#) reserves and has recently begun developing its [oil](#) sector, it appears unlikely that either of these two resources will be responsibly used by the authorities (which are under the domineering influence of the military) for the betterment of the population. Even the possible construction of the [Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline](#) through Nigeria, Niger, and Algeria en route to Spain and the rest of the EU isn't realistically expected to help much owing to the oligarchic and corrupt structure of the governing elite. Moreover, this project might never even see the light of day because of the fact that the large-scale dissemination of LNG technology is quickly making sea-based transport of this resource just as – if not more – competitive than overland routes in some instances such as the aforementioned one.

### Military:

Apart from the attraction that Great Powers have to Niger's energy resources, the country is also a focal point of competition chiefly just because of its strategic position. Proceeding in a clockwise rotation, Niger borders Algeria, Libya, Chad, Nigeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, and Mali, and it's also very close to Cameroon as well due to the shared regional space that it enjoys around the Lake Chad basin. Being located in the heart of the Sahara, foreign forces can operate with ease across the multistate bordering region and thus throughout most of the breadth and width of North-West Africa.

This is why France has [troops](#) in the country as part of Operation Barkhane (and prior to that simply to [protect](#) its uranium mines) and that the US [operates drone bases](#) in the capital of Niamey and the Saharan town of Agadez, [dispatched special forces](#) to the Boko Haram-threatened border town of Diffa, and is [rumored](#) to have access rights to an airfield in the country's second-largest city of Zinder. It's therefore not hard to see why Niger has become the [new hub](#) for the US' special operations in North-West Africa, and by reasonable NATO-allied inference, it can be understood that the French military also exploits the country for similar purposes.

### Summary:

Even though Niger might be proverbially located 'in the middle of nowhere', it definitely has an undiscovered significance that most observers have neglected to notice up until now. The country's demographic statistics, particularly its extreme poverty and explosive birth rates, point to startling risks for long-term stability and frighteningly portend the unmistakable signs of a looming humanitarian crisis, but France's energy stakes in the country combined with it and the US' geostrategic military interests there guarantee that the West will play some sort of a role whenever that happens. The prospects for domestic conflict in Niger are worrying high, but before getting into the specifics of what these entail, it's important to take a deeper look at France and China's involvement in the country in order to get an idea of how its [two largest economic partners](#) could be affected by any forthcoming violence there.



Most analysts agree that China and the West are fiercely competing in Africa for markets and resources, and geographically 'godforsaken' Niger is no different from the rest of its continental peers. The US has been [expanding its military footprint](#) all across Africa, and though it's the most militarily preeminent force in Niger, it lacks the legacy of institutionalized and economic contacts of influence that France has, most of which are predicated on Paris' pressing need to sustain the security of its vital uranium trade there.

The author briefly touched upon this in a 2014 [article](#) that was published on RT, and the reader is encouraged to refer to it in seeing how the US might one day leverage its military influence in Niger in order to put pressure on France. For the scope of the present writing, however, this won't be expanded upon any further, and the rest of this section will investigate the specifics of French-Chinese strategic involvement in Niger in acquiring a more profound understanding of each competing actor's long-term plans for the country.

#### France:

Like it was described in the preceding section, France's military-economic focus on Niger is chiefly due to the [uranium trade](#) that its state-run Areva company enjoys with the country. To give the reader a sense of just how important Niger figures into France's energy equation, it's enough to mention that the former imperial power [derives approximately 75%](#) of its electricity from nuclear power, with Nigerien uranium [accounting for 40%](#) of that. This works out to the Saharan country [providing](#) for around a little less than a third of France's total energy needs, which lends understanding to why Paris [deployed troops](#) to its [two mines](#) in Arlit and the unopened one in [Imouraren](#) in order to protect its highly strategic assets there from retributive Salafist militant attacks in 2013. This decision was made in the context of France's military campaign in neighboring Mali, though the move didn't prevent Arlit and the irreplaceable transit city of Agadez from [being hit](#) in May of that year.

To elaborate a bit more on the pertinence of Agadez to France's energy security, extracted uranium from the Arlit mines must pass through this city [en route](#) to the Beninese coastal city of Cotonou, which is the country's largest city and the location of its only seaport and international airport. This is likely attribute to France wanting to avoid any sort of strategic transit dependence on independently inclined Algeria, hence why it prefers instead to rely on the geographically circuitous route of going overland through much more easily impressionable Benin before shipping the precious resource by boat to its eventual destination. Furthermore, it can be logically inferred that the uranium convoy is guarded by French troops or private security teams, and while Algeria would be absolutely opposed to these units transiting its territory, Benin probably has no such qualms. On a related note, there's talk of improving the efficiency of this hitherto road-only route to the Atlantic by taking advantage of the [regional railroad plans](#) that aim to construct an iron corridor through Burkina Faso, Togo, the Ivory Coast, and most relevantly for France, from Niger's Niamey to Benin's Cotonou.

[Corporate legal drama](#), however, has [stalled the initiative](#) and made Niger consider detouring its coastal pathway through Burkina Faso and Togo instead, which might in the future present an alternative and/or complementary route for Areva's uranium exports. For the time being, though, the Niger-Benin route is the company's preferred one, but this transit necessity also tangentially extends France's energy security concerns through Niger's southern neighbor as well. Benin is a mostly stable country, but it does have a history of being rocked by [ethno-regionalist divisions](#) between its northern Muslim tribes, the southwestern descendants of the once-proud Kingdom of Dahomey, and the

southeastern Yoruba who also extend into neighboring Nigeria and constitute one of the main ethnic groups there. Resultantly, although France doesn't directly have an on-the-ground military presence in this tiny sliver of a country, it might one day be compelled to have one or to stage a neo-imperialist *Françafrique* intervention there in contravention of the leadership's will if Benin ever slides into domestic chaos and inadvertently disrupts the viability of France's uranium export routes through its territory.

#### China:

Beijing's approach to Niger is slightly different than Paris', though understandably on account of the fact that China is by far a 'latecomer' to the country and therefore had much less time to build up influence there. With that being noted, China has still managed to carve out an impressive sphere of influence within the country, focusing mostly on oil and uranium resource extraction. Unlike France which is much more deeply involved in the industry, China only has access to one uranium mine in the town of Azelik. Business Insider did a [write-up](#) about this investment, albeit in their characteristically biased manner, though it might be interesting to the reader to go through it nonetheless. The main point that the publication is trying to push is that the locals are apparently antagonistic towards the Chinese because of what they try to hint at is the country's stereotypical avoidance of human and labor rights, though this sort of an 'angle' says more about the agenda of this pro-Western media outlet than it does about China's. It's long been known that the West uses this line of rhetorical attack in order to delegitimize Chinese investments and precondition the masses into accepting the possibility of labor unrest and militant activity against Beijing's projects, both of which could be strategically weaponized by the US as a form of Hybrid War against China. The competitive 'encroachment' that China has made on France's prized uranium industry in Niger is probably what's to blame for why the West is so proverbially up in arms and literally wants its local proxies to one day be as well.

Supplementary to China's uranium investment in the country is its foray into the oil industry, though this has also been fraught with a lot of controversy. A [dispute](#) between China and Niger last fall led to the temporary shutdown of Beijing's oil refinery in Soraz, a small town near the second-largest city of Zinder in the south-central part of the country. As explained in the above link, incidentally also from Business Insider, this facility is located quite a distance away from the Lake Chad-neighboring oil reserves that China has permission to tap into, though this is because of internal Nigerien political reasons and is possibly attributable to the government wanting to craft the illusion that more of its citizens are benefiting from this investment through the visible employment of some locals outside of one of the country's main cities. In the future, China hopes to expand its in-country oil exports by [constructing](#) a [pipeline](#) through Chad, which would then link with the already existing one built by Exxon in 2003 and thenceforth ship the Nigerien black gold to the Cameroonian port city of Kribi. Due to the transit reliance on Chad and especially Cameroon, it can be argued that China seeks to integrate Niger into the CCS Silk Road, though by using the oil pipeline route as a pilot case prior to broadening the planned corridor to include commercial products as well.



#### Weighing The Differences:

##### *France*

In evaluating France and China's grand strategies to Niger, it's easy to see that each Great Power has similar, yet fundamentally different, approaches. The French are depending on the military and that of their American ally in securing Paris' valuable uranium export routes, with the former colonial master not seeming to have any wider interest in the country besides that. It can rhetorically be argued that France doesn't want Niger to ever become a terrorist haven (ergo Operation Barkhane), but this only cynically extends as far as preventing any terrorist attack against French interests, be it the uranium trade or the European homeland. Anti-government terrorist/rebel groups that are not of an Islamic disposition and accordingly aren't assessed as posing any significant threat to French interests could actually be quite useful for Paris one day in that they could apply pressure on Niamey if it ever leans too close to Beijing.

All that France would have to do in such a case is simply tolerate the existence of such groups and make sure that Operation Barkhane doesn't interfere with their activities, or on the reverse, actually in some sense helps to create and/or encourage such movements to take shape. This Machiavellian policy might one day become the standard application of *Françafrique* all across the Operation Barkhane space, with France ordering its in-country troops to selectively intervene against such groups in the event that it finds it strategically or politically convenient to do so. In the Nigerien context, France has a stake in proving its 'post-imperial' 'benevolence' towards its hosts and could thus help the Saharan country's military in carrying out tasks of joint importance, such as providing logistical-technical-intelligence support for operations against Boko Haram, Tuareg rebels, and/or Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Paris essentially wants to do what Beijing can't, which would thus reinforce its importance to Niamey and make the government/military less likely to take any decisions that could endanger France's vital uranium interests (such as allowing China a bigger footprint in the industry).

### *China*

China's way of dealing with Niger is altogether different from France's, although it does in principle share the same energy foundation as its European rival. The cornerstone of Chinese involvement in Niger is Beijing's interest in the uranium and oil industries, but it's from here where China's motives markedly diverge from France's. Instead of plotting to use its energy investments as a magnet for inviting a military 'protection' racket into the country, China seeks to one day expand its planned energy export routes through Chad and Cameroon to include a real-sector commercial component that has the promise of fundamentally transforming Niger's [development prospects](#). Granted, it would be overly optimistic to even assume that such a route would ever be fully created, let alone reliably safeguarded from any of the Hybrid War disruptions that will be described in the following section, but the concept of stability and growth through Chinese-backed trade routes is a powerful idea that already has many analogues all throughout the continent, so it's bound to capture the imagination of some Nigerien citizens – and most importantly, their political-military decision makers – if Beijing ever decides to unveil a New Silk Road strategy for the country.

In practice, China could invest in roads, railways, and other trade-facilitating infrastructure along Niger's densely populated southern strip in order to extend the energy CCS Silk Road from the south-central town of Zinder across the country's lower periphery and thus link Niamey all the way to Douala (the CCS Silk Road's terminal). If combined with the planned West African Railway system through Niger, Benin, Burkina Faso, Togo, and the Ivory Coast,



then this would interestingly create a ringed network of transport infrastructure all around Nigeria that would infrastructurally unify the transregional West-Central African space of France's former colonies. Moreover, the interlinking of a Sudan-Chad (two of the three transit states on the CCS Silk Road) trade route with another one in Burkina Faso and beyond to the rest of the West African countries (such as being proposed with the West African rail project) by means of Niger would in effect actualize a transcontinental Sahelian-Saharan trade corridor from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea coasts. The blueprint for this are [Trans-African Highways](#) 5 and 6, with the exceptions being that Nigeria is skirted around until it stabilizes enough to be responsibly integrated into this network and the Sudanese portion terminates in Port Sudan instead of continuing through Ethiopia to Djibouti (though this latter route should eventually one day be utilized).

#### French-Chinese Competition:

Observers shouldn't underestimate the wide-ranging consequences that the Sahelian-Saharan Silk Road from Senegal to Port Sudan would have in radically transforming the geopolitics of this vast space, which is why France is hesitantly cautious about this while China is actively enthusiastic. The challenges are manifold, however, and they include not only disruptive Hybrid War risks, but more mundane issues such as bureaucracy and a lack of political-economic willpower on behalf of the transit states (such as is the issue with Chad at the moment in pertinence to the CCS Silk Road). These obstacles play to France's favor, as does its transnational military presence all along this route under the aegis of Operation Barkhane, but if China managed to break through these barriers and make significant progress on this project, then it would almost certainly engender some sort of asymmetrical French response, most likely in the form of Hybrid Warfare or a Paris-backed coup/rebel takeover of one or another transit state.

The importance that this has for Niger is paramount, since if the regional dynamics shifted in such a way as to promote the perception that China's Sahelian-Saharan Silk Road vision will tangibly be completed in some functional way (e.g. if tangible progress were made along both the eastern and western vectors), then Niger's military leaders/kingmakers might decide that their country's future best belongs in the hands of China, not France. If such a change in perspective remained solely in the realm of attitude and didn't take any physical manifestations, then it wouldn't pose a challenge to France's hitherto hegemony in the country nor prevent Paris from indefinitely retaining the Damocles' Sword of disruptive controlling influence over this route (e.g. Hybrid Wars, coups, etc.). If Niger makes any moves that frighten France, such as curtailing its military cooperation and presence in the country and/or allowing China a broader stake in the uranium sector, however, then it could result in a sudden exacerbation of French-Chinese competition in the strategically positioned Saharan state.

#### Rebels, Insurgents, And Terrorists

All of Niger's Hybrid War threats revolve around one or another armed group, with five separate actors being described in this section. They can be arranged into two types of categories – actual or latent, and borderland or interior – though the distinction within and between each of these classifications can quickly become blurred as various scenarios switch from being active to passive and move from being geographically concentrated to more broadly threatening, or vice-versa in both regards. Beginning with the most relevant threats and proceeding to those that are still in their incipient stages, Niger's forecasted portfolio of Hybrid War risks looks like such:

## Boko Haram:

It's a given that Boko Haram would figure as the most pressing of all of Niger's threats after seeing how the cross-border terrorist organization has [directly targeted](#) the country itself on several occasions. Niger actively partakes in the Chadian-led anti-Boko Haram Coalition and even requested once that its Saharan neighbor [dispatch 2000 troops](#) to the country. Niamey fears that Boko Haram could one day morph into an existential threat for Niger because of a confluence of several motivating factors, namely that the terrorist group is already active in the bordering territories of Nigeria; the Niger-Nigeria border is infamously porous; and the militants could suddenly cause a lot of damage and panic in the country by striking anywhere within the densely populated southern border strip. Furthermore, some analysts [believe](#) that the group is now targeting Niger more frequently after having suffered a debilitating bout of infighting in early September that weakened its once-dominant position in Nigeria's northeastern Borno State.

Under ever-increasing threat from the terrorists, Niger's best bet is to establish a degree of strategic depth together with its Chadian ally in carving out a buffer space along the shared Nigerian border. This is of course easier said than done and requires a high degree of multilateral coordination and trust between all sides, though both of these are lacking and Nigeria is particularly sensitive to foreign operations being conducted on its soil, no matter if these are being done 'for the collective good' and because Nigeria's corruption-decayed military is unable and/or unwilling to liberate the territory itself. Should all the countries of the anti-Boko Haram Coalition succeed in isolating the terrorists and securing the borderland region, this would only be sufficient for defending against the conventional land-grabbing expansionist danger that that the organization poses. Even though Boko Haram might no longer have the capability to stage cross-border raids and gobble up weakly governed peripheral territory in the Lake Chad basin, this shouldn't be taken to mean that its sleeper cells all throughout the region can't function as delayed time bombs in giving the group a 'second wind' sometime in the future.

Therein lies the interlinked problem between Niger's exponential population growth and its vulnerability to terrorism, since the government will be unable to provide for all of its citizens in the future and thus many of them could become attracted to terrorist propaganda. In fact, it might even turn out to be that Boko Haram's 'second wind' starts off in Niger once the demographic situation there spirals out of control (however long or short it may take for that to happen) and reversely spills over the Nigerian border in an ironic twist of fate. After some time it might make sense to consider Niger and Northern Nigeria as a single strategic space after the former's population eventually comes to rival the latter and cross-border problems continuously permeate between them. While the amalgamation of Southern Niger and Northern Nigeria into a unified theater of planning could theoretically lead to positive outcomes for development and other humanitarian considerations, it's not foreseeable that decision makers on either side of the border will see it that way except when pressed to do so out of urgent security concerns such as the most likely one which was just described. It would be wisest if China's Sahelian-Saharan Silk Road initiative proactively played a role in positively bridging the border between these two regions in order to preempt this problem from festering, but it might turn out to be that the disruptive scenario discussed above actually undercuts China's integrational one.



People march in support of the Niger army's war against Boko Haram in Niamey, Feb 2015.

## Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM):

Along a related vein to Boko Haram, the same imminent demographic explosion which threatens to prompt a surge of domestic sleeper cell support for the Nigerian-based terrorists could also lead to one for [AQIM](#) as well. This organization is much more shadowy and has thus far not laid claim to any territory like Boko Haram has, except if one accounts for when AQIM-affiliate Ansar Dine [hijacked](#) the Tuareg-led “Azawad” project in neighboring Mali from 2012-2013. That example could provocatively even be argued to have served as a prelude to Daesh’s similar desert surge along the Syrian-Iraqi border one year afterwards, though it would in that case be much better to label the proto-Al Shabaab “[Islamic Courts Union](#)” in Somalia as the ultimate godfather of this trend for its uncontrollable territorial expansionism in 2006. Anyhow, the importance in recalling these examples is to illustrate how a mysterious terrorist group not currently active in the territorial-administrative sense could rapidly transition to this model if the domestic, international, and geographic circumstances are favorable. One should remember the tactical-strategic lessons introduced in the previous two chapters about Cameroon and Chad whereby it’s postulated that easily traversable geographic spaces such as the Sahelian-Saharan ones around the Lake Chad basin are inherently much more at risk of sudden terrorist expansionism than their more comparatively impassible jungled counterparts.

One key element of difference between Boko Haram and AQIM, at least thus far, is that the former usually only launches attacks in or near areas that it hopes to one day control, refraining for the most part from threatening the other more distant parts of Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria. AQIM, however, has no such apparently self-imposed constraints, as the Al Qaeda franchise that it’s formally a part of has a history of killing people all across the world and striking at whichever seemingly random targets that it chooses. While it’s difficult to accurately quantify, it could be safely assumed that AQIM has a wider operational reach than Boko Haram due to its affiliated global network, presumably better finances and more ‘qualified’ conspirators, and its unconstrained geographic theater of activity. Therefore, while Boko Haram might for the time being only threaten the Southern Nigerien core space, AQIM might more nimbly be able to unpredictably strike here and there all throughout the country, be it [near the capital](#) or in the Tuareg-majority [northern desert](#). Although AQIM might not seem like much of a threat in the current day, this is simply because it’s been largely inactive and totally overshadowed by the much more publicized exploits of its Daesh competitor in the Mideast and West Africa (with Boko Haram ‘formally’ being allied with the Al-Baghdadi’s ‘caliphate’), and responsible observers shouldn’t disregard its future potential.

## Tuaregs:

One of the most dynamically evolving Hybrid War threats in Niger stems from the transnational [Tuareg ethnic group](#) which resides primarily in the northern Agadez Region. The [Tuareg](#) are a mostly nomadic people who also live in Mali, southern Algeria, and [southwestern Libya](#), though many of them in the latter two countries are thought to be refugees who were pushed out during the many civil conflicts which erupted in Niger and Mali, although that isn’t at all to say that [this group](#) isn’t endemic to these areas. However, the Tuareg presence in Algeria and Libya bestowed each of these rival countries with the chance to diplomatically intervene in resolving Tuareg-related crises in Mali and Niger as a means of bettering their own position and indirectly competing with one another. This was the case in the past, though it’s extraordinarily unlikely that Libya will ever again hold the diplomatic sway over this community as it did during the Gaddafi, meaning that Algeria will



likely continue to retain some degree of influence or diplomatic intervention potential over the Tuaregs in northern Mali, though it's unclear if any outside force (aside from their neighboring brethren) could exert pressure on their Nigerien counterparts and fill the void that Libya left.

To continue speaking more about the Tuaregs themselves, several important comparisons can be made to the Kurds and Baloch. All three groups are proud of their identities and fiercely secular, and some members of their communities have a history of waging separatist conflicts that easily spill across the border. Moreover, the Tuaregs, Kurds, and Baloch are "stateless" in the sense that they don't have their own nation-state and instead live within larger cosmopolitan ones, which is a political fact that has recurrently been exploited by both their own communal demagogues and foreign instigators in order to incite conflict against their state of residence. The biggest difference between the Tuaregs, Kurds, and Baloch, however, is that the former are much smaller in numerical size than the other two though they're inversely spread out across the largest area of the three. Additionally, from a geographic-tactical standpoint, the Tuaregs mostly live in flat desert areas that are easily traversable during blitzkrieg offensives, such as the one which was launched in Mali in 2012 and will be addressed real soon. Some Tuaregs also live in mountainous regions in Mali and Niger which function as military 'redoubts' and are valuable strongholds during times of civil conflict. These bastions are also less vulnerable to air strikes, thus raising the stakes for the national military in having to conduct risky ground operations in clearing them out, something which neither the Malian nor Nigerien armed forces typically have the stomach for doing.

The above strategic-tactical considerations are important to understand because they were observably on display during the four regional [conflicts](#) that the Tuaregs prominently took part in, each of which ended up spilling across the border or had the high risk of doing so. The Tuaregs were fighting in every case for one or some of the following reasons:

- \* independence;
- \* broad economic-political autonomy (devolution);
- \* decentralization;
- \* affirmative action/positive discrimination for enrollment in state institutions (military, government, etc.);
- \*and violently venting general frustrations (e.g. about the repatriation of refugees, rebel amnesty, ceasefire/peace implementation delays, rabblerousing, etc.).

The first Tuareg conflict of the modern era was a very low-scale rebellion in Mali between [1962-1964](#) and was properly contained by the authorities. It wasn't until [1990-1995](#) that a much more significant cross-border one broke out both in that country and [Niger](#). It, too, was eventually put down, with Niamey having to radically resort to locking down the Agadez Region in order to do so, though. The end result was that the Tuaregs were supposed to be integrated into Nigerien and Malian state institutions, though this didn't happen at the pace nor scope that some of the Tuaregs had expected and another war eventually broke out from [2007-2009](#) in [both](#) of them. This phase of the recurring regional conflict was significant for two reasons; firstly, it [AQIM](#) started to get involved through kidnapping and banditry, thus drawing international attention to what would otherwise be an obscure conflict in the middle of nowhere to most of the global audience; and secondly, the Tuaregs founded the "[Niger Movement For Justice](#)" rebel group which served as an 'inclusive' front for their respective interests, just as the "Syrian Democratic Forces" function for the Kurds in today's Syria.

Both of these trends – the Salafist exploitation of Tuareg conflicts and the Tuareg creation of ‘inclusive’ rebel organizations to disguise their local objectives – would repeat themselves once more during the latest 2012 Tuareg War in Mali. During that time, the armed Tuareg which had been living in Libya [fled](#) their protector state amidst the large-scale breakdown in law, order, and safety that NATO had provoked, [bringing](#) their heavy weaponry with them as they returned to their native homeland in Mali (by way of Niger). The [resultant conflict](#) that exploded led to the de-facto establishment of ‘Azawad’, which is what the leading [National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad](#) (MNLA) rebel group called the France-sized political unit that they had carved out for themselves. Part of the reason why they were so successful at doing this in the course of only a few months is because of their [alliance](#) with Ansar Dine, an AQIM affiliate that eventually [took over](#) ‘Azawad’ in summer 2012 and turned it into a terrorist state. This prompted France’s Operation Serval in early 2013 and the supportive intervention of [nearly 2,000 Chadian ground troops](#) there, all of which transited through Niger en route to the conflict and served to underscore the very close military relations between Niamey and N’Djamena (which would be reinforced 2 years later through the anti-Boko Haram Coalition).

The outcome of the French-Chadian intervention in ‘Azawad’ was that the MNLA joined in the counter-offensive to evict the terrorists from their declared homeland, though with the significant political concession being that they [renounced](#) their separatist claims. After the conflict was ‘officially’ over (though by no means militarily completed, seeing as how it [still seethes](#) to this day), the Tuaregs were granted [partial autonomy](#) by the central Malian authorities, though this wasn’t satisfactory enough to placate some of the [hardliners](#). The situation in Northern Mali is deteriorating to the point where it looks like another low-scale Tuareg insurgency is imminent, though it’s unclear how widespread it would be and whether or not it would have the potential of spilling across the Nigerien border. Niger remained relatively calm amidst the 2012-2013 events in Mali, and the authorities did an effective job of keeping the peace and preventing any copycat ‘uprisings’. In the future, however, the French anti-terrorist Operation Barkhane deployment in the country could be directed to encourage and/or support Tuareg-led ‘rebels’ as a means of applying anti-Chinese pressure against Niamey, so the situation needs to be continually monitored for any signs that it’s moving along this scenario path.

#### Anti-Government ‘Rebels’:

Descending down the ladder of the most likely Hybrid War threats to Niger, one must at some point discuss the role of anti-government ‘rebels’, whether Tuareg-led or otherwise. These groups appeal to certain segments of the population because of their redistributionist platform, in which they call for the more equitable sharing of revenue from the country’s uranium and oil resources. This populist pitch could theoretically become very attractive to many Nigeriens who are desperate to escape their country’s ignominious poverty, and if their message is skillfully crafted and actively disseminated, then the rebels could succeed in ginning up significant anti-government discontent which could then be directed towards provoking a Color Revolution and/or Unconventional War (Hybrid War). Niger’s southern strip is highly at risk of falling under the influence of rebel ideas because of its out of control poverty and population growth, which go hand in hand with fostering the conditions for anti-establishment sympathies. It was already described in the research how this could play to the advantage of Salafist terrorists, but the same principles of appeal could also be applied towards secular insurgents as well, which might even see these two ideologically opposed actors dueling it out with one another in the future as part of a multisided civil war.

Expanding on that idea, Niger already has a documented history of Tuareg-led rebel formations, which were previously mentioned to have been mostly rhetorically inclusive front organizations for promoting Tuareg interests. Due to their battlefield experience in Niger and Mali, Tuaregs could once more take the lead in assembling an armed anti-government organization, albeit one which this time truly works to promote the southern/Hausa agenda as well. Tactical coordination between the two transnational Tuareg and Hausa border populations and the regular reinforcement of trust between such identity-separate parties might be difficult to engender, but should it be reached, then the new rebel group that would be created from this pragmatic alliance could end up becoming a serious threat to the authorities. Niamey would have to divide its military focus between north and south, with each cardinal direction requiring a different strategy in combating the insurgency, as fighting against rebels in the windswept deserts of the sparsely populated Tuareg-inhabited north necessitates a different approach than doing so against their allied counterparts in the more densely populated Hausa-majority Sahel region in the southern part of the country. In practice though, the above scenario might not realistically come to pass, as the technical, logistical, and other difficulties standing in the way of a Tuareg-Hausa anti-government alliance might be too strong to fully surmount, thus leading to any 'inclusive' rebel front between these two groups being mostly of a nominal and symbolic form.

Considering this, Niamey might more easily be able to divide each component of the rebel front and deal with them separately on its own terms, thus lessening the physical challenging in containing this sort of insurgency. The Hausa aspect of this scenario will be discussed in the next subsection devoted more fully to it, so for now the analysis will proceed with the Tuareg tangent. With history as a reliable indicator, the Tuaregs will more than likely play some sort of leading role in the event that a new and inclusive rebel group is formed to fight against the government. However, for as much of a tactical advantage as the incorporation of Tuareg militants might be to the incipient insurgency, it would also carry with it a certain strategic vulnerability because Niamey could somewhat convincingly argue that the attempted establishment of a 'Nigerien Azawad' might also get hijacked and overrun by AQIM or Boko Haram extremists just like how the Salafists took over its Malian counterpart several years ago. This fearmongering angle, whether grounded in situational facts or historical hyperbole, would be premised on attracting French support for the government's anti-insurgency operations, thus compelling Paris into either actively or passively getting involved in the conflict. From one side, France could remain on the sidelines just as it officially did during all of Niger's previous Tuareg-involved insurgencies, even if it discretely decides to support the rebels or the government. On the other side, however, France could be more interventionist and enthusiastically encourage one or the other party, whether through joint anti-rebel operations with Niamey or open backing to the insurgents.

Ultimately, France's attitude towards any Tuareg-led rebel movement will be conditional on the state of affairs between Paris and Niamey, and whether the former imperial master perceives its *Françafrique* policy to be under threat by China and Beijing's ties with Niamey. If France feels confident with its position, then it assuredly wouldn't have any interest in destabilizing Niger, and might on the contrary actively involve itself in stopping any incipient conflict before it spirals out of the control. But, if the Chinese are perceived to be making headwinds in Niger and Paris becomes overly dissatisfied with this in general or has (speculative) reason to fear that its uranium investments might be adversely affected (perhaps over concerns that a pro-Chinese Niger might play uranium games with France just

like a pro-Western Ukraine did with Russian gas), then Paris might secretly redefine its Operation Barkhane mission in the country into one of supporting – not opposing – [anti-government insurgency](#). Like such covert interventions typically end up, France might inadvertently advance the conditions for Niger's total collapse, which coupled with the already existing AQIM and Boko Haram threats, could turn the traditionally secular country into a hotbed of Salafist terror just like Syria has become, and with similar regionally impacting consequences vis-à-vis Nigeria this time instead of Iraq and Turkey.

#### Hausa:

Lastly, the [Hausa](#) of Southern Niger comprise the country's [largest demographic](#), and while being the most unlikely cause of any potential Hybrid War in the future, their widespread involvement in any unrest could have the most powerful and immediate impact of any of the aforementioned scenarios. This is due not just to their numerical prowess and concentration along the country's densely populated, highly impoverished, and exponentially growing southern belt, but also because of the Hausa's transnational identity and strong presence in Northern Nigeria. In fact, there are nearly six times as many Hausa living in Northern Nigeria than in Southern Niger, meaning that the potential is indeed present for Nigerien members of this demographic to be influenced by their Nigerian counterparts. Furthermore, if the Hausa in both states identify more with their ethnic identity than their civil one, then they might agitate for "[Hausaland](#)", whether as a separatist entity or a sub-national '[Identity Federalized](#)' state with quasi-independence.

One way to prevent this from happening is for each country to sufficiently accommodate the interests of this group so that they don't come to feel (or be misled by negatively intentioned forces into thinking) that their issues could be better addressed outside of the respective state that they presently inhabit. As it relates to Niger, the government must be careful not to [decentralize](#) far enough to the point that the Tuaregs are perceived to have reaped inordinate benefits, such as through de-facto political and/or fiscal autonomy (with the latter relating to uranium revenue). Niamey would not willingly move in this direction except as a concession to a forthcoming Tuareg insurgency that it had difficulty taming, though the inadvertent effect of this sort of convenient compromise could be that it sparks Hausa hatred in the south and inspires a whole different type of anti-government challenge (e.g. a Color Revolution and guerrilla warfare). Again, this particular scenario doesn't seem to be too promising because it would first necessitate a Tuareg rebellion in the first place, which hasn't yet repeated itself, and then the government would have to be unable to comprehensively deal with this on its own or in joint cooperation with France before settling for the type of political-economic concessions to the Tuaregs that could then in turn incense the Hausa.

Looked at from another angle, however, the Hausa don't necessarily have to be seen as only constituting a Hybrid War threat, since they could also materialize into an anchor of cross-border stability if Niger took the proper steps in this direction. The global trend towards regional integration appears irreversible for the time being, and it's possible for the Hausa to play a unique role in bridging Niger with Nigeria to tighten the West African Core Region (WACR) and turn it into a more robust center of African Multipolarity. This could also expand the prospective Sahelian-Saharan Silk Road into Northern Nigeria concurrent with similar inroads being made by the Cameroon-Chad-Sudan (CCS) Silk Road in Southern Nigeria as part of a comprehensive strategy for linking Nigeria into the transregional trade networks that China is charting along its periphery. The problem, however, is that Niamey doesn't fully trust Abuja, believing that its southern neighbor might use the numeric superiority of

the Hausas in its territory to influence its cross-border counterparts and thenceforth Niger's domestic political affairs. Moreover, if either country 'loses control' of the Hausa, then they might splinter off to promote "Hausaland" between them, which could also possibly be just as susceptible to a Boko Haram hijacking as a 'Nigerien Azawad' would be to similar subterfuge from AQIM.

Sooner or later, though, Niger needs to figure out a visionary policy for bettering the livelihood of this demographic because the explosive population growth that's projected for the future will lead to instability, uncertainty, and humanitarian challenges that could predictably amalgamate into one large crisis, made worse by the fact that the Nigerien Hausa might one day outnumber their Nigerian counterparts and thus reverse the presumed power dynamic that presently exists between the two neighbors (of Nigeria having the chance to use Hausa to influence Niger). Worsened by terrorist attacks and rebel uprisings, to say nothing of the ever-haunting specter of Color Revolutions, Niger could easily descend into failed state status and become a geopolitical victim of the French-Chinese Cold War in the West African Core Region.

## Coups

The last instrument of Hybrid War that could be utilized against Niger is a military coup, of which the country already has a storied history. Coups were carried out in [1974](#), [1996](#), [1999](#), and [2010](#), with the most recent one interestingly occurring right after the 2007-2009 Tuareg-involved conflict and amidst a sharp deterioration of French-Nigerien relations. It's definitely possible that the French had a hand in overthrowing President Tandja after the [constitutional crisis](#) that was triggered when he took moves to run for a third time. It's also relevant that this was right around the time when China was awarded its first uranium mine in the country, which probably sent alarm bells ringing in Paris and prompted Sarkozy to take measures to indirectly deal with this and prevent the presumed pro-Chinese alignment of the Nigerien government from spiraling out of control and jeopardizing the strategic security of France's uranium investments. The government announced that a mysterious coup plot was [allegedly foiled](#) in December 2015, but because of the dearth of details and secrecy surrounding the situation, it's unclear exactly what this could have been linked to, who might have really been behind it, or even if it was an actual threat at all in the first place and not a blown-out-of-proportion or manufactured pre-election scandal by incumbent President Issoufou (who went on to [win re-election](#) in early 2016 by an over 80% margin).

Prognosticating that Niger will probably experience many internal troubles in the future because of its explosive population growth, widespread poverty, and high risk of militant violence (whether of a Salafist or secular nature), it's foreseeable that the military might one day be forced to intervene in stabilizing the situation if the formal government is incapable of dealing with it. Just like how the [2012 Malian coup](#) took place amidst deteriorating domestic conditions, so too could a Nigerien one occur under similar stresses in reaction to demographic pressure and/or uncontrollable terrorism along the southern belt. The population might even encourage this because of the relief that it could provide them in ameliorating the difficulties that some might exclusively blame the civilian government for the time of these hardships. The military, unlike the politicians, are the only institution capable of holding Niger together, protecting its borders, and fighting rebels/terrorists, and since it's already embedded in the state by means of its economic and natural resource influence, it shouldn't be too difficult in most cases for the generals to dispose of the president. Judging by Niger's history, the putschists would more or less be accepted by their African Union counterparts in spite of the stringent opposition leveled against their actions



and the country's temporary suspension from this organization. Following Niger's established template, democratic motions would be commenced, cosmetic changes would be made to the constitution, and the military would promote a civilian stand-in government to publicly rule in its place after elections are held.

The determining factor that could break this oft-repeated cycle would be if France were opposed to the military coup, which would only be the case if it either didn't have anything to do with it or 'something went wrong' and the 'wrong faction' seized power. To remind the reader, France is in a heated competition with China for influence all throughout Africa, with Niger being one of the battlegrounds in which this Cold War is being fought. France could initiate the covert proceedings or give the green light to any possible coup attempt against the existing government in order to offset what it feels is the authorities' uncomfortable coziness with the Chinese, though it's also theoretically possible that a 'counter-coup' could occur among the members of the military elite who genuinely believe (or have a self-interested investment) in China's One Belt One Road vision. The same latter point could also be applied towards the population, both in terms of those who might be pro-China by that time and in favor of the Sahelian-Saharan Silk Road project or those who for whatever reason (whether they are even consciously aware of it or not) support French interests in this country. As a result, popular outrage against a coup might take the form of a Color Revolution (if backed by the French) or a people's protest (if in alignment with Chinese interests). Therefore, one must expect that interlinked coups and Color Revolutions could become an occasional occurrence in Nigerien politics as the outgrowth of French-Chinese competition in the country takes on new and adaptable forms.

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